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Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

Work Life Balance in the Context of the Navy
by

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December 2015

Prepared for: Women's Policy Office

Dr. Jessica Miliam

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Summary

This study sought to develop a better understanding regarding the experience of life-work balance by members of the U.S. Navy. This study was prepared in conjunction with a student thesis, which provides a detailed literature review and examination of gender differences in perception of life-work balance (see Emanuelson and Lee, 2015). A survey was administered to Navy officers conducting graduate studies at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California and their spouses. The findings indicate a number of interesting trends regarding the desire for balance in the Navy, varying perceptions of the Navy's child- and elder-care resources aimed at enhancing balance, as well as the significance of designators (i.e. career specialties) and commanding officers (COs) to the experience of balance as well. In the sections that follow we highlight these issues, draw causal conclusions, and present sailors' recommendations, drawn from responses to open-ended questions.

Background

After deleting respondents with missing data our final sample consists of 197 officers. Results are based on correlation analysis of the study variables with a .05 level of significance. Participants were also invited to respond to open-ended questions and invite their partners to do the same. Twenty-two partners responded.

Findings and Conclusions (to include Process)

The analysis shows that the extent to which the Navy's programs, policy, and culture enable life-work balance are not only important to attracting competent recruits, but also becomes increasingly influential to retaining a highly skilled workforce. There is a noticeable drop in the salience of the Navy role and a marked increase in the family role when sailors have children. The number of employees who deal with elder care concerns is comparatively small and therefore child care concerns represent a more prominent issue. Nevertheless, when extrapolating to the entire workforce, elder care issues may be confronted by fairly sizeable number of employees. Importantly, even sailors who do not have dependent care responsibilities believe that work demands often conflict with their family and life roles.

The analysis shows that many sailors perceive benefit from Navy programs and policies. However, current programs and practices fall short of expectations by those who may be most in need of and most likely to value balance-related initiatives, and in turn these shortcomings could ultimately contribute to turnover decisions. Additionally, sailors' comments to open-ended questions called for further culture change and more positive examples from leadership, suggesting that practice may lag behind policies and programs.

Designators are influential to the experience of balance and conflict. Sailors in HR, Information Dominance, and the Supply Corp seemingly consider balance to a greater

extent when choosing their careers than do those in other designators, while Seals, Submariners, and SWOs are less concerned, at least initially, with balance.

Overall, the quantitative analysis and sailors' and partners' comments suggest that life-work balance is and will continue to be an important issue. Providing greater flexibility in work schedules may be a particularly effective way to reduce turnover and retain highly experienced human capital. Further, additional work to ensure that Navy culture and leadership support the programs and policies designed to promote life-work balance may be required, and this effort should include consideration for the life-family needs of sailors without dependents. Future studies should determine in which designators addressing work-life issues are most important. For instance, Seals and SWOs report fairly similar and high levels of work family conflict, but this appears to have minimal effect on Seals', but much stronger effect on SWOs' impending career decisions. As such, the Navy should focus its life-work balance initiatives toward the designators most affected by these issues and work with COs to alter current cultures and policies that may be exacerbating these effects.

Finally, an important theme that emerged from partners' comments is the need to involve family in decisions that influence life-work balance, and to involve families in setting expectations.

Recommendations for Further Research

In responses to open-ended questions, sailors called for further culture change and more positive examples from leadership, suggesting that practice may lag behind policies and programs. Further research should identify key cultural barriers and suggest levers for change.